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TAGS: KPAL PTER PREL PGOV
SUBJECT: IRAQI EMBASSY REPORTS WORSENING SYRIAN-IRAQI
RELATIONS
Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Chuck Hunter for reasons 1.4(b,d)

¶11. (C) SUMMARY: In the early phases of preparing to organize voting for an estimated million Iraqi refugees in Syria, the Iraqi Embassy in Damascus has received instructions to "stop talking to Syrians" as new allegations emerge regarding the involvement of Syria-based terrorists in the October 25 attacks in Iraq. Statements recently broadcast on Iraqi television by captured militants alleging they were paid by Iraqi Baathists based in Syria to plan bombings in Baghdad on October 25 are heightening tension between the two governments. Iraqi officials here view a recent telephone call by Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem to the Iraqi Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari as a provocation. Iraqi diplomats say they routinely see leading Iraqi Baathists freely walking around Damascus "doing whatever they want." The Iraqi Embassy is busy preparing to facilitate the participation of Iraqis living in Syria in Iraqi national elections planned for early next year. Whether Iraqi diplomats can organize a voter registration drive, and administer elections, in the face of mounting Iraqi-Syrian tensions is unclear. END SUMMARY.

"DON'T TALK TO SYRIANS"

¶12. (C) Ahmed Ubaid (strictly protect), an Iraqi diplomat working on media and external relations at the Iraqi Embassy, told us November 22 he and his colleagues have received instructions to "stop talking to Syrians" from the Iraqi Foreign Ministry in the midst of deteriorating Iraqi-Syrian relations. He said Iraqi diplomats have also been instructed to exercise vigilance and not to use their automobiles after 3:00 p.m. out of concern for their safety. Ubaid reported he even refrained from telling people at his Damascus gym he is Iraqi "because I don't trust Syrians right now and I don't want to interact with them." Ubaid opined "things will get worse" in the wake of recent allegations broadcast on Iraqi television that Iraqi Baathists based in Syria were responsible for the October 25 bombings in Baghdad that killed and wounded hundreds.

¶13. (C) Ubaid reported that a recent phone call from Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem to the Iraqi foreign minister "made things worse" and led to the Iraqi MFA's instructions to its diplomats in Baghdad. Muallem reportedly offered to review any credible evidence the GOI might possess on the involvement of Syria-based Iraqi exiles. He reportedly denied SARG support for Iraqi Baathists in Syria and refused to hand over Iraqi Baathists, further angering FM Zebari. Ubaid said the Iraqi Foreign Minister informed Iraqi President Jalal Talabani and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki about the call, and the Iraqi MFA subsequently instructed Iraqi diplomats in Syria to refrain from engaging with the SARG.

4.(C) Ubaid reported Iraqi diplomats were still meeting with the Syrian MFA about administrative issues, but said

substantive discussions about bilateral relations had ceased.

He was particularly critical of SARG Vice Foreign Minister Faysal al-Miqdad, stating "every time we go to see him nothing gets better. He is not helpful." Ubaid added there were no plans for the return of an Iraqi ambassador to Damascus. Even if an ambassador were to return, Ubaid said it would not be Ambassador Alaa al-Jawadi, who was withdrawn from Damascus after the August 19 Baghdad bombings.

Claiming al-Jawadi had fallen out of favor in Baghdad, Ubaid said: "The ambassador didn't share information with the president and the prime minister." Ubaid shared his sense that the MFA might order a draw-down of Embassy personnel out of growing concern regarding the staff's safety. "Our embassy lacks perimeter control and access and we feel vulnerable and exposed to potentially hostile Iraqi elements operating freely here," he averred.

BAATHISTS ARE FREELY WALKING THE STREETS OF DAMASCUS

¶ 15. (C) Iraqi diplomats report frustration at seeing Iraqi Baathists wanted by the Iraqi government for Saddam-era abuses and terrorism in Iraq freely walking the streets of Damascus. "We see 25-30 Baathists all the time. We see them walking the streets and they can do whatever they want," Ubaid complained. Among the Baathists Iraqi diplomats have seen in Damascus are Mishan al-Jabouri, Izzat al-Douri, and Mohammed Younis al-Ahmed. Al-Ahmed was one of two Iraqi Baathists the Iraqi government asked the SARG to hand over following the August 19 Baghdad bombings. "How can the Syrians say they don't know anything about these people? How can they say they are not supporting them?" Ubaid asked.

¶ 16. (C) Ubaid reported that Jabouri's television station

STILL PLANNING FOR ELECTIONS

¶ 17. (C) Despite deteriorating Syrian-Iraqi bilateral relations, Ubaid confirmed Iraqi diplomats in Syria were busy preparing to facilitate the participation of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi refugees living in Syria in Iraqi national elections planned for January. Acknowledging problems with voter fraud during last January's provincial elections, Ubaid said he had reached out to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to use its list of registered Iraqi refugees as a starting point for a voters' list. Ubaid stressed the embassy anticipated the arrival of GOI personnel to help set up and man a dozen registration and voting centers for Iraqis in Syria. The Iraqi Embassy plans to allow Iraqis in Syria not registered with UNHCR to vote if they present valid identification, but will use the UNHCR list as a baseline. "We had problems with people in the last elections voting four times, and we are working very hard to avoid that this time," Ubaid said. (Note: Just over 215,000 Iraqis in Syria had registered with the UNHCR as of October ¶ 130. UNHCR Deputy Philippe Le Clerc told us his office had received the Iraqi request but would not be able to provide "names" or other data. UNHCR would however work with the Iraqi Embassy to coordinate registration drives and election-day voting. End note).

¶ 18. (C) Ubaid claimed his embassy colleagues had heard the SARG was supporting former Prime Minister Ayad Allawi or Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi, "because they are both former

Baathists." Echoing reports by other Arab diplomats, Ubaid related that Allawi was recently in Damascus and met with Iraqi Baathists and SARG officials. Ubaid expressed concern the SARG would attempt to influence the outcome of the Iraqi voting in Syria in favor of Allawi "even though most Iraqis in Iraq support al-Maliki."

¶9. (C) The Iraqi Embassy continues to encourage Iraqi refugees to return home, Ubaid said, noting the embassy was planning two flights for refugees to Baghdad on Prime Minister al-Maliki's official plane in the next two weeks. "It's propaganda for the prime minister because he gets to say he sent his plane to bring the refugees back, but we are taking advantage of it to do good," Ubaid said. Ubaid said a significant number of Iraqi refugees may return home if the elections go well. "I think we need to wait to see what happens after the elections. We should have a better idea of the number of refugees remaining in Syria after that," he concluded.

¶10. (S/NF) COMMENT. Since Baghdad recalled Ambassador al-Jawadi for consultations the Iraqi Embassy has largely retreated from the diplomatic scene. Led by an O2-equivalent Charge who was the Deputy Consular Chief, the embassy has taken regular verbal beatings from senior Syrian MFA officials since the August 19 attacks in Baghdad, particularly regarding Baghdad's decision to severely restrict the movement of trucks ferrying Syrian goods across the border. Ubaid was unconvincing on the embassy's ability to organize a registration drive, and administer the elections, in the face of mounting Iraqi-Syrian tensions. Syria might be willing to help facilitate these activities, but its main motive for doing so would be to use the votes of Iraqis here to shape the outcome of the election next door.
END COMMENT.

HUNTER